

## **“An Arab Marshal Plan: A Partnership and Cooperation for the Future of the Middle East” — Conference Report**

On Saturday May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, La Maison du Futur (MDF) hosted a major international conference in Bikfaya, Lebanon, on the theme of “An Arab Marshal Plan: A Partnership and Cooperation for the Future of the Middle East.”

The historical 1947 “Marshal Plan”, officially known as the “European Recovery Program” (ERP) was a US initiative of massive support to help rebuild European economies, remove trade barriers, modernize industry and prevent the spread of communism in the aftermath of World War II.

MDF is engaged in considering the ERP model for a potential effort to foster the recovery of the Arab World — An “Arab Marshal Plan” based on good governance, education as a means to fight against fundamentalism, and economic and social development.

The conference was organized in partnership with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), a think tank closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), and was attended by notable European, US, Canadian and Arab political and academic figures.

The conference consisted of welcome addresses followed by a morning session, a lunch address, and two afternoon sessions.

### **Welcome Addresses**

The conference was launched with a welcome address by **President Amine Gemayel**, who briefed the participants on the historical role of MDF, as a pioneering center of studies and research in Lebanon and the Middle East since the mid-1970s.

President Gemayel highlighted the forward-looking role of MDF and the inclusive approach it has set forth for all Lebanese irrespective of affiliations or sects, providing a space for dialogue and discussions since its inception.

He added that after a hiatus, MDF has resumed its role and activities in promoting peace and furthering strategic thinking to shape a brighter future for Lebanon and the region.

He stressed that the best means to face radicalism and quell extremist movements, in light of the sweeping wave of violence and extremism in the region, is through development paired with education, both of which Arab societies are in dire need.

“Education in its comprehensive meaning and higher dimensions will produce a tolerant culture, promoting the acceptance of others, which is what MDF is aspiring to achieve,” he said.

“Education should be at the basis of state authority for a good governance to advance our societies, countries and our region. Unfortunately, our education system continues

to be strict and insular, while the answer and solution to our predicament is an open and civil education,” he added.

President Gemayel also stated that “We ought to work on bringing back the intellectual elite, creative minds, and skilled people that have emigrated, by setting up an encouraging and promising environment for them to make use of their talents and skills in their homelands in order to promote development in the region.”

President Gemayel underlined that the joint effort between state and citizens, as well as between state and world community, towards the pursuit of good governance, ought to be shaped by “partnership and not paternalism.”

Finally, President Gemayel pledged that he would dedicate his time, effort and expertise to uphold and sponsor such initiatives for the sake of Lebanon, freedom and humanity.

For his part, **Christian Clages**, ambassador of Germany to Lebanon gave opening remarks, highlighting the close relations between President Gemayel and Germany. He mentioned the Yugoslav refugee crisis in Europe, in general and Germany in particular, and how the EU dealt with it through partnership EU memberships, assistance and project with billions of Euros. He stressed that the region needs a vast investment to create employment and that before the outbreak of the current crises the region’s countries were already in need of massive economic and social reforms.

He also added that among the major triggers of the Arab Spring revolutions was the fear of young people that they would not find an appropriate political and economic perspective in their societies at the beginning of the 21th century, which is the key to stability and peace.

He suggested addressing the current regional conflict with the European experience in mind and to launch a healthy process for the Middle East, one that can benefit from the European perspective.

In turn, Peter Rimmel, KAS Resident Representative in Lebanon, applauded MDF leading role in forwarding its mission to draw a better future, and the key Lebanese intellectuals who were part of it and have striven to achieve a better tomorrow.

“The future is not shaped by itself, but it is being shaped. Where do societies want to go? MDF mission is to help answering that question, contributing to shaping the future for the Lebanese people and the region,” he concluded.

### **First Session — The Aptness of Germany’s post WWII experience on the region’s future in the wake of the Arab Spring**

The session was moderated by **Joe Khoury**, Professor of social psychology in charge of postgraduate courses in social psychology at the Lebanese University, was the moderator of the first session.

The first speaker, **Selim Sayegh**, former Minister of Social Affairs in Lebanon, stressed the “resiliency of the Lebanese people, their quest for a common space and citizenship,” and ability to absorb shocks.

He also addressed the issue of the marginalization of Christians and said that in light of the current wave of extremism the fear of marginalization is growing.

“What will be the cost of the return of Hezbollah from Syria to Lebanon?” he asked. However, he highlighted the liberalism of Lebanese and their ability to adapt to dire situations, especially today in view of large numbers of Syrian refugees flowing into the country.

Sayegh stressed the economic resiliency of Lebanon’s banking sector, which protects the country against many risks. He noted that Lebanon ranked number one in the Middle East in terms of tolerance, personal expression, gender issues, the support of democracy and the separation of state and religion.

He finally stressed that in order to better face the ongoing economic and social crises in the country, Lebanon ought to stop taking loans and instead seek to obtain donations and invest in education, culture and technology.

For his part, **Sami Aoun**, Professor at the School of Applied Politics, University of Sherbrook, Canada, discussed models that can help reestablish order and peace in the region.

He stressed that Lebanon ought to be a model of liberal democracy, which is the only way out of the current ideological, cultural and geopolitical crises in the context of the Arab Spring, and the need to preserve the state as a whole rather than to support the different communities, whether in Lebanon or in the rest of the Arab world.

Aoun underscored the need of a secular, civil, democratic peace to neutralize the state in Lebanon, especially in light of the Shiite and Sunni geopolitical polarization represented by the Iranian and Wahabi regimes.

He concluded that Lebanon ought to uphold the concept of a secular democratic state to preserve the country’s stability.

**Gunther Beckstein**, former Prime Minister of the State of Bavaria, Germany, was the session’s last speaker. He offered a personal perspective on how the original Marshall Plan was implemented in Western Europe after WWII and how it provided hope and prosperity for the people of Western Europe. He underscored the help of the US and the UK to help rebuild European economy.

## **Second Session — Beyond Turbulence: The Region’s Future**

**John Bell**, Director of the Middle East and Mediterranean Program at the Tolido Center in Madrid, was the moderator of the second session. He suggested that in order

to look into a Marshal plan for the region there are a few questions that need to be raised:

- Is partnership and cooperation between the Middle East and other partners viable?
- Is the situation in the region containable or manageable?
- Is there a need to deal with the conflicts of the region before moving on to socio-economic developments, or do these two things happen in parallel?

Representing **Abdulaziz Sager**, Chairman of the Gulf Research Center, **Mustafa al-Ani** joined the conference via Skype call.

He stated that from a GCC point view, there is a need to protect the Gulf states from the impact of the Arab Spring. Today the Gulf States have to deal with the repercussions of the Arab revolutions in Yemen.

Ani harshly criticized the US foreign policy, saying that US President Barack Obama wants to avoid any confrontation or engagement and to cut losses during his remaining term in office. "In the region, we are suffering from the US foreign policy and its invasion of Iraq," he said.

"The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) and other extremist groups in Iraq is the result of the defective US policy," Ani added.

The Obama and Bush Administrations have promoted chaos and instability. "We are still suffering from the outcome of the bad American policy for 14 years."

He also added that Obama's administration is unclear especially in the Middle East and based on the "Too little too late" strategy.

Ani criticized the US "disengagement" policy and raised many questions, saying: "Why ISIS intervention in Syria is seen as a crime and an external interference, while the intervention of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and Iran's Revolutionary Guard are not seen as such?"

"Why does the US policy tolerate Hezbollah interference in Syria? Why is ISIS sectarianism rejected, while the US has supported Nouri Maliki's sectarian policies for eight years, pushing the country towards the edge of the abyss? Why does Iranian General Soleimani move freely in Iraq and Syria's cities, without being tracked down by the US aircrafts?" he added.

Ani also said that there is a major trust issue in the "US lax indecisive foreign policy," especially with Iran's policy of expansion in the Arab world, stressing that it is not possible to fight the expansion of ISIS and that of Iran at the same time. He urged the US to fight against the Sunni and Shiite terrorism on equal footing, away from the policy of selectivity.

Finally, Ani stressed that the GCC believes that the only solution to the Iranian nuclear issue is the political and diplomatic solution, warning that any agreement with Iran on its nuclear program would set the wheel of nuclear weapons in motion in the region.

For his part, **Philip J. Crowley**, former US Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, talked about the US policy to promote a new order in the Middle East and praised MDF initiative to hold such debates and dialogues to promote peace and stability in the region. He underlined the US objectives in the region, mainly the need to contain Iran, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and promoting responsible governance in the region, greater economic opportunities, and respect for human rights, particularly for women and minorities.

However, he said comprehensive peace “is still in a coma,” especially in light of the ongoing Palestinian and Israeli conflict, stressing that the two-state solution is the only viable solution.

Crowly added that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has survived four years of civil war only because of “the support from Iran and Russia.” He also addressed the nuclear negotiations with Iran, stating that despite the “rapprochement” with Tehran, Iran continues to oppose the US regional objectives, referring to it as the “great Satan.”

He stressed that Washington’s current policy in the region is “not disengagement but sustainable engagement,” seeking to achieve multilateral rather than unilateral solutions, while letting the players in the region “take the lead” and help “build regional capabilities.”

**Enders Wimbush**, managing partner of State Various LLC, a global consultancy, underlined the significance of tectonic shifts in the Middle East and the external players impact on the future of the region. He spoke about Russia being today on a “steep downward projector,” including a decline in its military ability, as a result of many demographic and energy factors, thus undermining its role as a major player in the region.

Similarly, he stated that Europe is also declining “in its capacity to play a major role” in the Middle East, as investment in military capability is down in “virtually every European state.” However, individual states, such as Germany and France, could play a role in “shaping the region’s activities.”

On the other hand, he stressed that Asia’s economy depends in part on what happens in the Middle East. He spoke about China and India, which are witnessing significant growth at the economic, military, and energy levels, making them potential major players and place them in competitive strategic positions in the Middle East, and therefore as main actors in any economic projects, mainly the Arab Marshall Plan.

He concluded that it is important for the Middle East in general, and Lebanon in particular to consider these “alternative worlds and new pathways” in setting forth economic strategies.

## **Lunch Address**

At the conclusion of the second session, the participants attended lunch at the MDF venue. In his Lunch Address, **Bader Al Humaidi**, former Minister of Oil and Finance

in Kuwait, applauded the initiative of an Arab Marshal Plan, and expressed his optimism and admiration for Lebanon.

### **Third Session — Towards a Global Partnership for the Middle East: A Comparative Geo-Strategic Discussion.**

The final session was moderated by Raouf Abou Zaki, CEO of Al-Iqtisadwal-A'mal Group, who praised President's Gemayel initiative to revive MDF role and stressed that the Middle East remains central in the international strategies, politically and economically.

Former Syrian Minister of Economy and Trade **Ghassan al-Rifai**, made an intervention in the session. He suggested calling the Arab Marshal Plan a “global initiative, as it goes beyond the reconstruction process and economic reforms to reach social pattern,” an initiative that should not be funded by Arab players in the region only, but by all concerned actors all over the world.

In the same vein, **President Gemayel** said that the main objective of this strategy, regardless of its name, boils down to one issue: “How to achieve humanity and the well-being of humans,” and uphold human rights, “whether through a Marshal Plan or a Global Initiative,” which is the ultimate goal of MDF.

On the ongoing conflicts and struggle against radical movements, Gemayel stated that Sunnis are the first to fight against extremist and fundamentalist groups, whether politically or militarily. He stressed that “several awakening groups” have risen in the face of extremism throughout the Arab world, and that the “dynamics of the goodwill” is victorious over evil to give people back their humanity.

He also said that this subject will be further elaborated on during workshops that will be organized in the future by MDF in coordination with other centers of researches and studies.

President Gemayel focused on four pillars to uphold human rights and to promote social and economic development in the region, starting first and foremost with education, to produce young generations that are open to dialogue, freedom, and acceptance of others.

Secondly, he underscored the need for the establishment of good governance, which is essential to serve humanity and fight corruption, unlike the case of the totalitarian Arab regimes that have prevailed in the region.

Thirdly, there is also need for “development projects,” in the region, which are crucial to the Arab world as “its resources are being squandered.”

Finally, President Gemayle reiterated the need to engage “in partnership” instead of “paternalism.”

For his part, **Naguib Sawiris**, Executive Chairman of Orascom Telecom Media and Technology Holding S.A.E, said that a European Marshal Plan in Germany and

Europe took place following the end of the war, while the war and conflicts in the region are seemingly dragging on, especially in light of inaction on the part of the US and Europe.

Thus, he suggested a “simpler plan” for the region that could be achievable amidst the ongoing wars, which is “the establishment of safe zones or tribal areas” for investments. Sawiris gave Kurdistan as a successful example of such safe zones, designed to create job opportunities and investment projects under international insurances against political threats.

He concluded that Lebanon is not neutralized in the ongoing regional crises, but “is at the core of the conflict,” whether “we like it or not.” However, Lebanon could play a prominent role in finding economic solutions to the region.

Finally, **Hassan Mneimneh**, Principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington D.C., underlined the parallel existence of “multiple Arab worlds” with distinct strategic outlooks: the Maghreb region, Egypt, the Gulf, and the Mashriq.

He stressed nonetheless the inter-dependence of these “worlds”. “Should the Mashriq fail, this would inevitably lead to the failure of the other Arab worlds and would as well affect the entire globe,” — an inter-dependence that seems neglected by the US administration.

Mneimneh stressed that Lebanon remains, however, relatively “immune” to the decay in the region, despite the presence within its borders of “an army affiliated with Iran.”

He voiced support for President Gemayel’s approach to promote development and stability in the region. He stressed in addition the imperative to uphold “the frame of reference of universal values,” beyond any other political or religious frames of reference. He also underlined the urgency of addressing processes causing cultural decay or “flattening” pointing to excesses in “the Islamization of sciences” as an example. Furthermore, he discussed the “hollowing of education,” which has aggravated the crisis in the region, stressing the need to introduce reforms in the education sector throughout the Arab worlds.

Mneimneh assessed potential global partners of the Arab world, noting that the US, China, India and Russia are partners of choice from their respective vantage points, while Europe is a partner of necessity, thus calling for the realization of a “Mediterranean partnership and alliance.”

He discussed the roles of Iran and Turkey, underlining that they are both essential actors and stakeholders for stability in the region, noting however the difference in the character of their current pro-active roles, Turkey engaging in “preemptive intervention based on inevitable interest,” while Iran in effect compounding the crisis.

## **Conference End**

The conference ended with concluding remarks and acknowledgements offered by President Gemayel, followed by cocktail reception on the MDF terrace.